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SACRED JOURNEY

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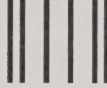
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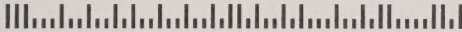
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Cover: Thai monks in natural meditation. © H.C. Choo

Prayer, Unaddressed

Lhaktong Sönam



In this issue Anam Thubten Rinpoche discusses the Prajnaparamita, a Buddhist scripture sometimes called “The Sutra of the Heart of Transcendent Wisdom”—or, more simply, the Heart Sutra.

As Rinpoche* explains, the Heart Sutra reminds meditators that our ideas about the world, ourselves, and others are just that: ideas, perceptions, stories. They are not Truth with a capital T, as we so habitually mistake them to be.

When he teaches in person, Rinpoche sometimes speaks of practicing the Prajnaparamita as “praying to emptiness.” This approach might seem different from what many traditions mean by prayer. It may help to know that *mönlam*, the Tibetan word often translated as “prayer,” literally means “wishing-path” or “path of aspiration”—a direction in which one sets one’s mind.

* Rinpoche, meaning “precious one,” is a term of endearment and respect used in reference to a Tibetan teacher who has committed to return, lifetime after lifetime, to benefit beings.

Lhaktong Sönam, a member of the board of Fellowship in Prayer, lives near Princeton, New Jersey and practices Buddhism in the Tibetan tradition.

To understand this further, consider a few more lines from the Buddha's teachings:

All that we are is a result of our thoughts,
Made up of our thoughts and founded on our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make our world.

How often do we even notice how wrapped up in our thoughts we are, or how solid we make them? Have you ever started a day thinking that it would be difficult, and found that expectation fulfilled? Or have you ever said to yourself, "Today I'm going to take things as they come," and found that the day unfolded with relative ease? Thoughts can have great power in our lives—and yet they're just thoughts, after all.

The Heart Sutra reminds us that everything we think, sense, or experience is "empty of nature," fleeting and insubstantial. This includes our most fundamental idea: That "I" am a solid, enduring, independent entity, separate from the world. But are you really the same *me* you were five years ago, or even five minutes ago? And who is this *me* "in here," without an "out there?" The sutra invites such challenging contemplation. It catalogs the bits and pieces that, according to Buddhist philosophy, make up "self" and its relationship to the world—and dares us to realize that the bits and pieces are all just ideas, perhaps sometimes useful, but not necessarily *true*.

Meditation, in the Buddhist tradition, means resting the mind, relaxing its grip on ideas and expectations. When we do this, as the Buddha realized and taught, we can begin, simply, to be—and that wordless, joyful, direct experience of simply being is *beyond* any notion we may have about it.

This message is the Heart Sutra's Sanskrit mantra: *Om gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. One way to translate it:

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, enlightened—so be it!

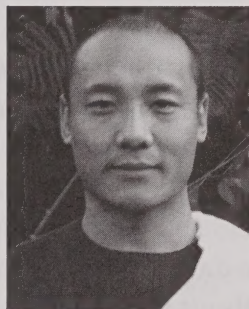
Or, if “enlightened” seems too abstract, the word *bodhi* could be understood as the essence of what we all really are: awake, aware, loving, open, free.

And so to pray the Heart Sutra, as Rinpoche explains, is to set one's mind along the path of realizing truth—not just to have ideas about what truth is, but to relinquish expectations and experience firsthand the joy, oneness, and openness of every moment. In reading this journal, may you find an invitation to that same joy, oneness, and openness, and realize that it is already yours.

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

An Interview with Anam Thubten Rinpoche

Anam Thubten Rinpoche serves as the main Dharma teacher for the Dharmata Foundation in Richmond, California and is also the spiritual leader of the Princeton Meditation Group. He was born in Golok, Eastern Tibet where at a young age he entered into Buddhist training in the Vajrayana Tradition. He is a scholar and writer with books published in both the Tibetan and English languages. His most recent work, No Self, No Problem holds wide appeal. During a recent trip to Princeton, NJ, he graciously granted us time to sit with him and ask him questions about his passionate love of true Dharma and The Heart Sutra.



Fellowship in Prayer: Would you tell us about the Heart Sutra and why it is considered the most essential teaching in Buddhism?

Anam Thubten Rinpoche: *Sutra* usually refers to the direct teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni ("the Awakened One" born over 2500 years ago). *Sutras* are the direct teachings of the Buddha as well as recorded teachings from the memories of the Buddha's disciples.

In Buddhism there is a whole discourse called the Prajnaparamita, literally translated as Transcendent Wisdom. This is the essence of Buddhist teaching, the union of wisdom and love. Love here refers to boundless love, an infinite love that embraces all living beings and

everything that exists. Wisdom refers to the realization of the highest truth, *shunyata* or emptiness, and *annatta* or soul less-ness, in Buddhist terminology. The Heart Sutra teachings are very much about discovering the emptiness of self or no-self and of emptiness itself. The *Prajnaparamita* has many, many volumes and the largest collection of over one hundred thousand verses is that of the *tertons* (Tibetan term for those who discover or reveal treasures previously hidden for the sake of future generations and/or because certain teachings were judged too advanced for those currently living.)

The Heart Sutra is actually an abbreviated version of the entire *Prajnaparamita* and the most essential *sutra*. It is used as a daily liturgy by those who cannot recite the full one hundred thousand verses of the *Parajnaparamita*! Practitioners recite the *sutra*, meditators use it as a way of entering into the *samadhi* (deep meditation) and teachers make commentary on it. The Heart Sutra encapsulates all the teachings of the Buddha, including the highest teachings that he has ever given.

What is the origin of the Heart Sutra?

Well, its origin is a little bit in the realm of speculation. Ideally, all the *sutras* are supposed to have been taught by the Buddha but if he didn't utter every word in a *sutra*, he at least blessed it as a witness. The Heart Sutra, for example, is based on the dialogue between the deity, Avalokiteshvara, and the elder, Shariputra. Buddha was a witness and blessed the entire dialogue and in that sense, teaching became the discourse of Buddha himself.

Historians suggest that many of the *sutras* were not recorded during Buddha's lifetime. It wasn't until a few hundred years after his *parinirvana* (final nirvana) that the *sutras* were finally written down on paper. Before that they

were part of oral tradition. A monk or nun would memorize the teachings of the Buddha from another master, who had memorized the entire oral transmission from another master and so it had continued with the lineage going back to the Buddha himself.

The Heart Sutra was actually revealed at the time of the great Buddhist master, Nagarjuna, an Indian philosopher, the founder of the Madhyamaka (Middle Path) school of Mahâyâna Buddhism, and arguably the most influential Buddhist thinker after Gautama Buddha himself. Because Nagarjuna's time was much later than Buddha's, some historians tend to argue that the Heart Sutra is not the words of the Buddha.

*The
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encapsulates
all the
teachings
of the
Buddha.*

What do you believe?

Personally, I believe that the Heart Sutra came directly from Buddha because the concept of starting with emptiness was taught by the Buddha, but I like to be open-minded and hear different voices.

Even if the Heart Sutra was not directly spoken by Buddha—each line, word by word—it was still recited by a monk who had the realization of emptiness and memorized the oral teachings. In some way then, it *is* the Buddha's words.

For me, realizing the Buddha's teaching or message is the essential point. I try not to define things in a narrow fashion. As long as the message is exactly the message of Buddha, then, I regard such a discourse as the Buddha's *sutra*. I believe that as time goes by in every spiritual tradition, teachings can be decorated and twisted and people may start to interject their own ideas or beliefs—and the teaching is

then like a diamond that is being obscured. It is the same as when we put on fancy clothes and makeup and our real personalities are buried somewhere underneath these layers. Sometimes, we can put too many of our own ideas onto the original teaching and the original meaning is masked. I believe the Heart Sutra is the pure authentic teaching of Buddha because there are no spiritual trappings, not even one single word in it that might take away from the essence of the Buddha's teaching—nothing that the Buddha hasn't taught.

You speak a lot about emptiness in Buddhism. How does one recognize that human existence is empty?

Buddhists believe that the only way one can discover liberation is through realizing emptiness. Emptiness is a very simple wisdom but also a very difficult wisdom to acquire. Ironically, it is both. So what is emptiness? It is not a nihilistic version of nothingness. It is the highest truth and cannot be encapsulated into any words or any concepts. The moment one has very strong ideas or philosophical views towards emptiness there is no longer the realization of emptiness.

Some people have the idea that emptiness is nothingness. That notion is an incomplete idea and mistaken view and is not the truth of emptiness—that view is nihilism. Emptiness transcends all nihilism and eternalism. Emptiness is not nothingness, nor is it some kind of supernatural being. It transcends every philosophical limitation.

What is emptiness then? Emptiness is not even emptiness; it is the highest truth which is beyond all comprehension. Buddha found it difficult to describe in human terms, words that could utterly, one hundred percent express every aspect

of the highest truth but he found a few words—one of them is emptiness, another one is suchness (as it is). He used the word suchness because he realized the moment he used fancy names to express concepts, then truth would be obscured. So, he just said suchness or emptiness.

“Emptiness” conveys the notion that truth is empty of all limitations, of concepts, of ideas, of birth, of death, of every condition, of every phenomenon, and everything that can possibly be in your mind. It is nothingness and not nothingness. You realize the self is not as solid as it seems to appear. You realize the self is illusory and so you no longer believe the illusion of self. Imagine having a few moments to take a break from the obsessive grasping of the illusion of self. You would experience a tremendous sense of freedom. You would feel that a huge burden on your shoulder has been removed.

This is not theological speculation. If you take a few moments to look into your consciousness, there is spiritual anguish no matter how much superficial enjoyment you might be experiencing. You could have a great guru or a lot of money, you may have won the lottery this very morning but there is still *dukkha* (suffering) because you can’t hold onto good fortune indefinitely. The Buddha defines *dukkha* as not getting what you want and getting what you don’t want.

So is it desire that prevents us from realizing emptiness?

Yes, it goes back to desire or craving. Greed creates much craving and dissatisfaction. These two aspects of existence go back to the “I.” I don’t have this about which I fantasize, and I have something else which I don’t want to invite into my life. When you realize the emptiness or the no-self, it

doesn't mean that you don't have ego anymore. You still have ego; you just don't believe ego. Ego is perception, a story line that supports the illusion of self. The story line tells you that you are real and separate from everything else, which is not the case. Once you realize no-self or emptiness, you don't believe any more in the story line told by ego but that does not mean that you don't have any more ego. You still have ego. With ego you are able to get up every morning and not wear somebody else's socks or shirt. Ego is needed, but in the moment of awakening, ego becomes your humble servant. Ego is no longer the master, so now you have this humble servant who makes money for you and serves you your food and makes sure that you find the right shirt in your closet. In this way ego is wonderful.

When you realize there is no self, does your relationship with everything else change and how is it different?

Absolutely! Yes! It is called oneness, the realization of oneness. This is what the truth is: we are one with everything. We are one with heaven, we are one with God, we are one with animals, we are one with plants, and we are one with the dust on the floor. This is the truth in the ultimate sense.

But the question remains: Why am I not able to realize oneness at this very moment if this is the ultimate truth? The answer is always the same—because my consciousness is obscured as by an “inner veil.” Imagine that you are walking in a very beautiful flower garden filled with all sorts of exotic flowers and you're talking with someone who is awake, whose eye is not blind or veiled and the person shouts, “Oh, this is such a beautiful flower. Did you see this flower? It is exquisite!” If your eye is veiled, then you cannot see it, even if you are walking in the middle of the same garden of



beautiful, exquisite flowers. The moment you remove the veil you suddenly realize, “Oh, I have been walking in such a lovely garden.” From the beginning, in order to see, the inner veil has to be removed.

What is this inner veil? The inner veil is dualism, the idea of an intrinsic separation between self and others. This separation is not true, even though it seems to be. We have manufactured this veil, this duality, and have believed in this illusion of reality for decades, for centuries. For Buddhists, the moment you remove this inner veil, you realize what you are searching for, you realize emptiness. If, for example, you are a Christian seeking God, you realize God. If you want to meet God face to face, you see the face of God. You realize the face of God is always near you, you just don’t always see it. God is not far away from you, God has never been far away from you, God is everywhere.

In this same way, Buddhism teaches that emptiness is everywhere, emptiness is an all-pervading entity. In Buddhism the whole point of spiritual practice, meditation and prayer is not to get somewhere or become someone else. It is all about going toward a single assignment, a spiritual assignment which is to remove the inner veil. Once that veil is removed—there is nothing else to do. There is nothing to relinquish, there is no place to go

*Buddhism is
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inner veil.*

and you are awake. You become one with everything. Your life becomes a life of love and compassion, as well as one of joy, and your relationship with everything is harmonious.

Going back to what you just said about coveting and dissatisfaction, are these kinds of desires really the source of suffering?

Yes, suffering is coming from this one source. In the enlightened consciousness there is no craving and there is no dissatisfaction. Why do we experience this existence of anguish, craving and dissatisfaction? The source is the self and attachment to the self. It seems to me that every spiritual tradition has the same idea: to go beyond the illusion of self. That's why in Christianity, for example, surrender is such a big thing. This surrender is the same as the *Prajnaparamita*. Without much inquiry and analysis, one surrenders the illusion of self to God. To the best of my knowledge, this is what devotion is all about in Christianity. Giving the illusion of self to God is the highest truth.

You mentioned the Heart Sutra is a liturgy. How do Buddhists practice the Heart Sutra in everyday life?

It is said every day. It helps us to remember the truth of emptiness, not to get lost in the trappings of the mind, in illusions and delusions, and to become one with all through enlightenment. Recently, one of my dharma sisters told me that whenever she wakes up, she meditates in silence for five minutes and then recites the Heart Sutra. She said her day is always beautiful because she is able to live in the mind of joy and awareness. She said this practice is quite powerful.

How does the wisdom of the Heart Sutra lead to compassion?

What is preventing us from experiencing, not just compassion, but infinite compassion—boundless love? Buddhism teaches that we are the Buddha; the Buddha is embodied in love and wisdom, so why are we not experiencing that divinity in each of us? Once again, the illusion of self is a dreadful illusion, filled with fear, paranoia, guilt and shame and therefore, it prevents us from experiencing infinite love. We are imprisoned in this illusion of self in a jail that is made, in large part, out of negative thoughts. With the Heart Sutra, once you transcend negative thoughts and no longer cling to the illusion of self, then you don't even have to cultivate love or compassion as a religious discipline. You become living love and compassion. You become an inexhaustible source of love and wisdom.

To read more from the interview with Anam Thuubten Rinpoche, please visit our website www.sacredjourney.org

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



Practicing the Heart Sutra

MEDITATION

It is helpful to begin with a brief period of silent meditation. In a quiet place where you will not be disturbed, sit upright, neither rigid nor slumped. Although some meditators use a cushion on the floor, it is fine to sit on a chair, feet flat on the floor, hands in your lap, shoulders relaxed. To help avoid sleepiness, keep your eyes open but not particularly focused, with your gaze slightly lowered.

Then bring your attention to your breath. As you do this, you need not try to stop thinking. If thoughts arise, simply notice that you are thinking, without judging or getting lost in the thoughts, and bring your attention gently back to your breath. In this way, rest in the present moment for five or ten minutes.

RECITATION

When you feel relatively present and calm, begin reciting the Heart Sutra. You can read it aloud in a straightforward, quiet voice, or, if you wish, chant it simply and steadily on a single pitch. While reciting can help keep your attention on the words, it is also fine to read the sutra silently to yourself.

After reading/reciting the full sutra, provided on the following two pages, some practitioners continue by reciting (or chanting) and contemplating the mantra:

Om gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha

om GAH-teh GAH-teh PAH-rah-GAH-teh

Om gone gone gone beyond

PAH-rah-sahm-GAH-teh BOE-dee SVAH-hah

gone completely beyond awakened so be it

You can say the mantra over and over again, as many times as you like. As you do, you might contemplate its meaning directly, or simply rest in the recitation just as one rests in meditation. Over time, the mantra may become a kind of shorthand to remind you, anytime or anywhere, of the quiet, contemplative heart of this practice.

Heart Sutra



Thus have I heard: Once the Blessed One was dwelling in Rajagriha at Vulture Peak Mountain with a great gathering of monks, nuns and Bodhisattvas. At that time the Blessed One entered the samadhi that expresses the dharma called "Profound Illumination." At the same time, noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, while engaging in the profound transcendent wisdom, clearly saw the five skandhas to be empty of nature. Then, through the inspiration of the Buddha, venerable Shariputra said to noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, "How should a son or daughter of noble family train, who wishes to follow the profound path of transcendent wisdom?"

Then noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, said to venerable Shariputra: "O Shariputra, a son or daughter of noble family who wishes to follow the profound path of transcendent wisdom should see in this way: See the five skandhas to be empty of nature. Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is no other than form; form is no other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness are emptiness.

"Thus, Shariputra, all phenomena are emptiness. They have no characteristics. There is no birth and no cessation. There is no impurity and no purity. There is no decrease and no increase. Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body,

no mind; no appearance, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no phenomena; no quality of sight, and so on until no quality of thought and no quality of mind-consciousness; no ignorance, no end of ignorance up to no old age and death, no end of old age and death; no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering and no path; no wisdom, no attainment and no non-attainment. Therefore, Shariputra, since the Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of transcendent wisdom. Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear. They transcend falsity and attain complete nirvana, passing beyond the bounds of sorrow. All the Buddhas of the three times, by means of transcendent wisdom, fully and clearly awaken to unsurpassable, true, complete enlightenment. Therefore, the great mantra of transcendent wisdom, the mantra of great insight, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra that equals the unequaled, the mantra that calms all suffering, should be known as truth, since there is no deception.

“The mantra of transcendent wisdom is said in this way:

OM GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA

“Thus, Shariputra, the Bodhisattva Mahasattvas should train in the profound transcendent wisdom.”

Then the Blessed One arose from that samadhi and praised noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, saying, “Good, good. Thus it is, O son of noble family, thus it is. One should practice the profound transcendent wisdom just as you have taught and all the Tathagatas will rejoice.”

When the Blessed One had said this, venerable Shariputra and noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, that whole assembly and the world with its gods, humans, asuras and gandharvas, rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.

ILLUMINATIONS



When you feel that you belong to God like the rays to the sun, the stream to the ocean, the soul to awareness; that is meditation.

~Swami Amar Jyoti

Life is a mystery floating on a sea of awe and I swim in it, as often as possible with the current.

~Rabbi Albert M. Lewis

Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.

~Black Elk

I still recall how, with my bag on a pole, I forgot my yesterdays. Wandered the hills, played in the water, went to the land of the clouds. The lift of an eyebrow, the blink of an eye—all of it *samadhi*. In this great world there is nowhere that is not a wisdom hall.

~Ziyong

18thc. Chinese Buddhist nun

It is not speaking that breaks our silence but our unceasing anxiety to be heard.

~Thomas Merton

Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need; the remainder is needed by others.

~Saint Augustine

The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.

~Joseph Campbell

The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

~Ben Okri

Empty your mind of all thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow.

~Lao Tzu

The effort of the genuine spiritual seeker should be to cultivate love until the mind becomes saturated by it.

~Bhante Y. Wimala

The wise have inherited wisdom by means of silence and contemplation.

~Manshadah al-Dinawari

If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.

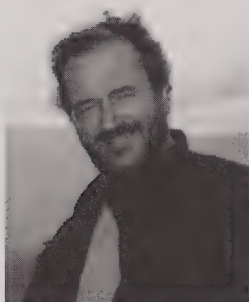
~Rachel Carson

Someone who doesn't make flowers makes thorns. If you're not building rooms where wisdom can be openly spoken, you're building a prison.

~Shams of Tabriz

The Question Holds the Lantern

John O'Donohue



Humans have an uncanny ability to domesticate everything they touch. Eventually, even the strangest things become absorbed into the routine of the daily mind with its steady geographies of endurance, anxiety and contentment. Only seldom does the haze lift and we glimpse for a second, the amazing plenitude of being here. Sometimes, unfortunately, it is suffering or threat that awakens us. It could happen that one evening, you are busy with many things, netted into your role and the phone rings. Someone you love is suddenly in the grip of an illness that could end their life within hours. It only takes a few seconds to receive that news. Yet, when you put the phone down, you are already standing in a different world. All you know has just been rendered unsure and dangerous. You realize that the ground has turned into quicksand. Now it seems to you that even mountains are suspended on strings.

If you could imagine the most incredible story ever, it would be less incredible than the story of being here. And

John O'Donohue, Ph.D. was an Irish poet and philosopher who loved and lived in the solitude of a cottage in the West of Ireland and spoke Gaelic as his native language. Sadly he passed away on January 3, 2008. This essay is reprinted with the permission of his estate. www.johnodonohue.com

the ironic thing is that story is not a story, it is true. It takes us so long to see where we are. It takes us even longer to see who we are. This is why the greatest gift you could ever dream is a gift that you can only receive from one person. And that person is you yourself. Therefore, the most subversive invitation you could ever accept is the invitation to awaken to who you are and where you have landed. Plato said in *The Symposium* that one of the greatest privileges of a human life is to become midwife to the birth of the soul in another. When your soul awakens, you begin to truly inherit your life. You leave the kingdom of fake surfaces, repetitive talk and weary roles and slip deeper into the true adventure of whom you are and whom you are called to become. The greatest friend of the soul is the unknown. Yet we are afraid of the unknown because it lies outside our vision and our control. We avoid it or quell it by filtering it through our protective barriers of domestication and control. The normal way never leads home.

Once you start to awaken, no one can ever claim you again for the old patterns. Now you realize how precious your time here is. You are no longer willing to squander your essence on undertakings that do not nourish your true self; your patience grows thin with tired talk and dead language. You see through the rosters of expectation which promise you safety and the confirmation of your outer identity. Now you are impatient for growth, willing to put yourself in the way of change. You want your work to become an expression of your gift. You want your relationship to voyage beyond the pallid frontiers to where the danger of transformation dwells. You want your God to be wild and to call you to where your destiny awaits.



You have come out of Plato's Cave of Images into the sunlight and the mystery of color and imagination. When you begin to sense that your imagination is the place where you are most divine you feel called to clean out of your mind all the worn and shabby furniture of thought. You wish to refurbish yourself with living thoughts so that you can begin to see. As Meister Eckhart says, "Thoughts are our inner senses." When the inner senses are dull and blurred you can see nothing in or of yourself; you become a respectable prisoner of received images. Now you realize that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" and you undertake the difficult but beautiful path to freedom. On this journey you begin to see how the sides of your heart that seemed awkward, contradictory and uneven are the places where the treasure lies hidden. You begin to become true to yourself. And as Shakespeare says in Hamlet, "To thine own self be true, then as surely as night follows day, thou canst to no man be false." The journey shows you that from this inner dedication you can reconstruct your own values and actions. You develop from your own self-compassion a great compassion for others. You are no longer caught in the false game of judgment, comparison or assumption. More naked now than ever, you begin to feel truly alive. You begin to trust the music of your own soul; you have inherited treasure that no one will ever be able to take from you. At the deepest level, this adventure of growth is in fact a transfigurative conversation with your own death. And when the time comes for you to leave, the view from your death bed will show a life of growth that gladdens the heart and takes away all fear.

PRAYERS



Meditation

Help me
open the door of my room:
put in wide
glass windows.
Help me move
through the world
feeling
what is real.
Show me how
to keep my heart
soft.
Help me be;
 help me breathe.
Bring me peace.

~ Cindy Forsburg

Cindy Forsburg holds a Masters degree in English. In addition to writing poetry, she is an adjunct professor. She lives in South Dakota and enjoys the broad views and wide skies of the prairie.

Enclosed in Wonder

God of the Wind,
 Spirit God,
You, God, Larger than Life,
 Greater than the Day,
 Fuller than the Event,
I can be alone with You.
 Alone with the Alone.
I feel scattered.
 Yet centered, breathing,
 Allowing your spirit to be in my sensing.
I dance and settle and move on. Slowly.
 Present to the Moment,
Full of human frailty and longing,
Enclosed in joy and wonder.

~ Donna J. Maebore
 Bedside Prayers

O Living Breath of God

O living breath of God, awaken us this day.
Open the windows of our souls.
Open the walls of our minds.
Open the doors of our hearts.
Awaken us to hope. Awaken us to joy.
Awaken us to the coming of the light.

~ Macrina Wiederkehr
 & Velma Frye
 Seven Sacred Pauses

Soul Song

The song of my soul
sometimes joyous
sometimes melancholy
a part of the process
of becoming whole.

~ John Constantine Mastor

As the Willow Bends

As the willow bends to the wind
And the leaf curls to the rain,
O Lord, I surrender to You.

Lead me on the straight way-
The way of thy servants;
The way upon which Thou
Has Bestowed Thy Mercy

~ Stewart Bitkoff

John Constantine Mastor lives in Seattle, WA.

Dr. Stewart Bitkoff specializes in therapeutic recreation, psychiatric rehabilitation and psychiatric treatment in the New York State's psychiatric hospitals. He holds a doctorate in education and has served on the faculties of NYU and other universities.



Alive With God

William McNamara



I am the director of a Carmelite Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado. Because we spend most of our time in solitude, our community life is very important. Some people misunderstand solitude and think of it as isolation. But it is exactly the opposite: if we really enter into genuine solitude, then we enter into the center of our being and connect with every other creature in the world. The communion achieved cannot be achieved in a crowd. When we emerge from that silence we really meet the other person, relate passionately and personally, and achieve presence. Therefore, the whole of spiritual life can be summed up in three words: personal, passionate, presence.

At our hermitage, the heart and center of all our practices, exercises, disciplines, and few rules relate significantly to being as constantly aware of God as we can possibly be. The whole person is engaged in the single-hearted mindful presence of God: intellect, will, instincts, emotions.

But even in solitude, mindfulness doesn't come naturally. To attain mindfulness, I awake at four-thirty in the morning and begin to thank God for a new day, a new

Fr. William McNamara is a lecturer, retreat master, author, and founder of the Spiritual Life Institute. Excerpted from Handbook for the Spirit © 2008 and reprinted with permission from New World Library. www.newworldlibrary.com

opportunity to discover Him, to enjoy Him in awe, to serve Him in awe, and then, by His power and grace, to be an instrument of His power and peace in my community and in the world. I am sure that the life of prayer and penance affects not only my immediate visible surroundings but worlds that I cannot dream of.

One of my favorite hermits, that great American author Henry David Thoreau, said that he would give first prize to the man who could live one day deliberately. That's what I mean by living mindfully. My early morning ethic is intended to achieve living one day deliberately—to become so centered that one becomes ultimately fascinated, ravished, and overwhelmed by the Mystery that permeates and suffuses all nature, all people, all reality.

One of the worst things we can do is slip or slide or drift into the day. It's important at the beginning of the day to think of ourselves as warriors and to engage in combat with the evils of the world, not merely to enjoy the day in a solipsistic way. Silence and solitude provide the best atmosphere for apocalyptic warfare with whatever evils dominate the world.

Genuinely religious people are not spooky, or bland, or stereotyped. They're simply more alive. Aliveness is primary. So is love. To be alive is to love. Those who live the most dangerously, creatively, and wonderfully are the great lovers in the world. The ultimate purpose of monastic life is to create an environment for lovers. One reason for being celibate is to be a greater lover. Although we have renounced certain genital aspects of sexuality, we have not repressed our sexuality, but refined and empowered that energy into creative aspects and expressions of love of another kind. The only reason

to renounce one particular pleasure is to enjoy the unbearable pleasure of God's company.

When I go to the city, people ask me, "What's it like to get back to the real world?" I say, "Where? I just left it." I even hate to distinguish between a profane world and a sacred world. There's only one world. The closer we come to the center, to the heart of things, the more we find God. If I come to the heart of a human meeting, if I come to the heart of a beautiful woman, if I come to the heart of a dog, I meet God. God's at the heart of everything.

*We enter into
the center of
our being and
connect with
every other
creature in the
world.*

We must get off the surface, away from the periphery, and move into the center where the fire is, and there become consumed by the fire and really become alive. Aliveness is the first effect of living a disciplined life. We must all become disciplined wild people. That's the spiritual life. You participate in the life of the spirit—the spirit of God. God

has no boundaries and no limitations. He's infinitely wild! All the psychiatrists and psychologists I know agree that one of the major reasons most people have mental problems is that they are not wild enough. Their lives have been too restricted and too tame. In the wilderness we try to participate in the wildness of God, not by developing multiple, dissipated, unconnected passion and desires, but by having one governing passion and desire that gathers all our little desires into one single-hearted mindful aim: realized union with God, a deeply personal, passionate relationship with the living God.

There are three steps in cultivating a relationship with God: meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Meditation—what you do, the way you think, the way you read—leads you to prayer. You must take a segment of the day when you stop all the ordinary aspects of your life and enter into a silent, solitary sphere of being. There you begin to meditate. St. Teresa defined meditation as a heart-to-heart conversation with God, our Father, who we know loves us. To be known, to be loved—that's what people need in meditation.

If you are led to prayer, the second step, then you cease to be the primary actor in this relationship and become wisely passive. Then meditation turns into prayer and you talk to God.

Prayer is a cry of the heart. Your ideas sink into your heart and the heart catches fire. You cry from out of your own inner truth. Sometimes that cry is exultation, sometimes sorrow, sometimes grief, sometimes madness—but always a cry of the heart. Now God becomes the primary active one. You are overwhelmed by the power of God, the spirit of God; and you are turned into a contemporary Christ. You think like Christ, you love like Christ, you act like Christ. That's prayer: simply to be there.

Then comes the final stage: contemplation—when you simply rest. The great scholastic theologians describe contemplation as the pure intuition of God born of love. When you have reached this point, you have nothing to say, nothing more to do. You are simply caught up in love, overwhelmed by being loved. If you really contemplate, your efforts will be effective and enduring.

Action without contemplation is blind. I am particularly critical of this situation in politics and

universities today. During their college years, most people lose their relationship with God. They lose their faith, humanity, and sanity because they're overwhelmed by data and information, but never achieve an understanding or wisdom, never move into the Mystery. Life becomes a series of problems to be solved instead of the Mystery to be lived. Very few take that crucial segment of the day when they do nothing but enter the chamber of love and let God reveal Himself and then send them, imbued with His power and His fire and His love, back into the marketplace—but transfigured: glowing and shining with the incandescent light of the spirit.

God is surprise. He always takes us by surprise! He is nothing like we imagine. God transforms us in ways we never dreamt of. One nun came from Florida during the rainy season to make her retreat. She wanted to intensify the pious routine she was already in—when this routine was the greatest enemy of her transformation. She wanted more pious reading more dialoguing, more meditating.

We met her at the airport, then traveled on our dirt road in a tractor, hauling her in an open cart thirty-five miles into the woods in the pouring rain! She stayed a month and said that her religious experience was not the reading, not the meditation, not the dialogue, not what she planned on, but her soaking-wet tractor ride! That's how God works. He comes and goes as He will.

God is not nice, God is not a mascot, God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake. If we're going to enter His cave, we're entering into the presence of a lion. Who knows if we're going to come out alive? God is love, all right. But because His love is unlimited and boundless; it's fierce! We can't afford to be routine or trivial about it. We can't afford to reduce God to our own measure and

our own management. We can't possess God or cope with Him the way we want. We must be overwhelmed by the lionine surprise of His personal passionate presence.

P O E T R Y



Consciousness of Feeling

consciousness of feeling
empathy of understanding
clarity of not knowing
acceptance of frailty
dignity in powerlessness
the force of giving
without expecting
the grace of receiving
in the same manner
caring for yourself
for them
caring for them
for yourself
finding reason in irrelevance
and tolerance for everything

~ Muller Davis

Muller Davis is a teacher and writer. He enjoys writing poetry and spending time in nature. He lives in New Mexico with his family.

Teresa Castaldi Morton, Ph.D. is a former college professor, now a writer and educational consultant. She received a Fulbright to study in India and also taught in Asia for the University of Maryland. She resides in Princeton, NJ.

Rachel Brower has enjoyed writing poetry for almost twenty years and is honored to have sixteen publications to her credit.

An Ode to Maine

Balsam Pines
stands of white birch
cooling waters rushing by.

Ancient lands
primeval paths,
traversed by many
with the spirit of one

The resonant stillness
of small ponds,
glacier lakes
pounding rocky shores.

My breath takes up your rhythm
My heart forgets its beat.
I shed my skin,
and my soul responds with music.

~ Teresa Castaldi Morton

In the Conspired Know

in the conspired know
I live open, seeing
synchronicity of being;
myself,
weaved within the whole.

~ Rachel Brower

Contemplation

A great blue heron
stands, unmoving.
Wavelets wash his knees,
splash, some high enough
to wet the feathers of his tail.
Still,
he stands,
unmoving.

Minutes pass
before he even
turns his head,
briefly;
then back to fixed attention,
watching windward,
waveward,
waiting.

I, meanwhile, fidget,
shift position, pick up shells,
study their design,
rise to gather driftwood,
return, sit, and watch
the waltzing waves some more.

Uneasily shifting yet again,
I grasp a pen and scribble –
while the heron
stands,
unmoving.

~ William D. Howden

Willism Howden is a poet, preacher and translator who lives in San Antonio, TX. He is president of Soul Windows Ministries. www.soulwindows.org



Quest for Consciousness

Lisa Zalovick



It has been a brutal undertaking: my attempt to sift through the vast wisdom of the sages, searching for an elusive treasure, that crown jewel better known as my authentic self. Like an explorer blazing an unsullied path through a thick brush, my soul weaves in and out of each penman's collection of knowledge, soaking up the erudite ponderings of my brilliant forefathers and eloquently gifted heroine mothers.

Brutal, maybe, but incalculable, most definitely. My commitment to this ritualistic mid-life dance is necessary, for I have been passed the symbolic torch by my maternal predecessors and am expected to receive it with great care and humble pride. I am steadfast in my quest for consciousness. It is a blessing more vital than a soaking downpour on a barren native terrain. I am entreating the gods of womankind to send a showering of the quintessential diamonds that evade me . . . the secrets to my genuine happiness.

Lisa Zalovick is a writer and healthcare practice administrator. She resides in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

As I chant my mantra again and again, "Be A Hollow Bamboo . . . Be A Hollow Bamboo," I am attempting to ensure that my soul-searching venture will be victorious and I will be ready for gleaning when the fruits of my labor present themselves. Practicing daily meditation and silent introspection reminds me to remain open and free of worldly clutter, so I can be filled with blessings of renewed awareness.

My soul knocks deliberately on each door, petitioning its master to bid me come in. Consenting as I take a seat at the pedestal of his perspicuity, my heart opens up like the arms of a weak child, anxious to be fed. My eclectic path leads me to the dwelling places of the most revered, whose diverse principles draw me in like a moth to a flame. I inhale the wise teachings of Buddha, the holiness of the Dalai Lama, the selflessness of Jesus, the simple wisdom of Confucius, the chasteness of Mother Teresa, the Taoism of Lao Tzu, the tranquility of Gandhi and the consciousness of Osho.

I swoon in the presence of spirituality and mysticism and I anxiously await the impending transformation of my essence. The splendid beauty of such luminous veracity but by a hair's breadth blinds me and I wane, insipid at the heavy bequest I have acquired. Overwhelmed with the anthology of saints. I breathe a prayer, asking that I might seize what I can hold in my

*My soul
knocks
deliberately
on each door,
petitioning its
master to
bid me
come in.*

diminutive vessel, and reserve the overflow for a future rendezvous with greatness.

The common quandary of the ripening sisterhood rears its ugly head as I fear a futile conclusion. My pursuit of bliss has seemingly dead-ended at the realization that one cannot, and will not, ever arrive at the intended destination. But then . . . Eureka! The epiphany bursts through my heart's door with a vengeance, and the crucial peace I had so vehemently sought washes over me like a warm rain, proudly displaying its banner that entreats.

A REFLECTION



In the Steam Room

Albert Lewis

In the steam room, cold water poured onto the thermostat lowers the room temperature and causes the boiler to produce steam. And when the steam comes out the system makes a sound that is at first startling; then becomes very calming like an extended “shhhhhh,” and nobody talks. But there are true conversations taking place. People sit surrounded by the “shhhhhh” and steam and I know there are dialogues and thoughts racing in and through them. Some of the internal conversations are about work and family, time and taxes. And some are quiet exchanges between man and God. The room fills with the haziness of steam, and while I cannot see the others in the room, I know they are there. Soon after the room has filled and the valve is silenced, the mundane chatter of men returns to markets, sports, politics and muscle aches. The door opens and closes as people enter and exit; and soon someone pours more cold water and the “shhhhhh” returns; as does the silence.

In my reverie I wonder if this is what it might have been like at the mythical mountain of God in the desert; a

Albert M. Lewis is the author of The Lord is My Shepherd: Psalms to Accompany Us on Our Journey Through Aging, columnist for the Grand Rapids Press and Rabbi of Congregation Beth El in Traverse City, MI. He is adjunct professor of psychology and gerontology at Aquinas College.

thundering sound—a type of eternal invitation to “shhhhhh”—eliciting a silence and a deeper communion. Then the sound and silence stops and the ordinariness of life begins again. I find myself drawn to the hissing and silencing of the steam (and the mount) and the invitation to go inward; to listen to something that is not chatter or about chattel, and then to return to the ordinary.

Ibn Hasdai writing in the 13th century said: “Man was given two ears and one tongue, so that he may listen more than speak.” It is a privilege just to listen. And, there is a fine distinction between “listen to” and “to listen.” When we “listen to” we are actively engaging our sense of sound for a particular audible cue. But, when we choose “to listen,” we are opening ourselves up to the sounds of silence and solitude; to ways and words unanticipated, unscripted and often—unfamiliar. We do not choose these words; they choose us.

Water may exist as liquid, solid or steam. In its various forms it may warm, cool or quench. So it is with silence and solitude and a timely seclusion.

On Pulse and Rhythm

Susan Chernak McElroy



In *Mystic Heart*, by Brother Wayne Teasdale, who was a modern-day monk and mystic, Teasdale writes, "Natural mysticism is the primordial revelation. . . . Long before writing and tradition, the divine reality communicated its light to us through all that is. Every ancient and medieval culture has known this truth in some form; it is part of the primordial tradition, the perennial philosophy, the universal wisdom that underpins the old cultures with their different religions. . . . This revelation is . . . always available to each one of us, in every culture, in every time, in any moment of our lives. It is thus the first and permanent source of revelation."

Summer is the time of moving water. The spring torrents are gone and the rivers have settled down to become emerald and azure. At the shallower places, you can even swim without turning blue. It is the perfect time for canoes and paddles and for lunches packed for friends. Along the shoreline, the tentative buds of spring have blossomed or leafed out by now or shriveled away. Big-eyed baby animals are sturdier now. The infants have thrived or become welcome food for predators.

Susan Chernak McElroy, a long-term survivor of advanced cancer, lives and writes in the shadows of the Grand Tetons. Her work explores the sacred. Excerpted from Why Buffalo Dance © 2006 and reprinted with permission from New World Library. www.newworldlibrary.com

Rounding the first bend of the river on a beautiful warm morning, my friend and I crossed the wake of an otter family. Their round heads cut through the water like a small flotilla of upturned teacups. When I caught sight of them, I couldn't help but blurt out exclamations. At the sound of my voice, the entire otter group turned our way and raised their heads for a better view.

To my surprise and delight, they swam back toward us, diving as they neared the canoe. A moment later, I could see them slipping through the water beneath us like a school of eels, trailing clusters of tiny white bubbles from their noses. When the bubbles reached the surface, they popped with a soft fizzing noise. For long moments I watched the otters like an excited toddler, with my mouth hanging open and my hands clenched. The young otters looked like miniature versions of their parents, just as quick, just as strongly muscled. Suddenly, in a choreographed burst of speed, they headed for the near shore, rocketed out of the water, and rolled and rolled their sleek bodies in the grass. They licked themselves, they licked each other, and they licked the grass. One of them shook off like a dog, spraying water over the entire gang, so the whole family had to start licking again.

Paddling farther downstream, we heard a crashing sound, as if a large concrete block had been dropped into the water. A short way off, an osprey flapped nosily in the current, then raised herself like a dripping phoenix into the air. In her talons, she held a good-sized trout whose nose pointed backward. I knew she wouldn't stand for this, and so I set my paddle aside to watch her.

The osprey surged upward steep and fast. At a certain height, her feet relaxed and she dropped the trout, which began spiraling back to earth. Instantly, she turned and

dove, extending her feet, clutching at the fish. When she straightened out her flight path, I could see the fish pointed nose-forward now, its tail waiving back and forth behind it, as though it were swimming upstream.

With binoculars, we watched the osprey fly to a huge stack of twigs and sticks at the top of a large evergreen. She called to her hatchlings as she flew, and even at a far distance I could make out the high-pitched whistles of her babies. No longer downy white balls of fluff, the young ospreys lurked at the edge of the nest like a set of determined vultures. Their wings were oversized for their bodies, and they dragged them around like heavy coats.

Beneath the flying fish, mergansers and goldeneyes swam in small groups, dipping their heads and bodies under water, then flapping boisterously, their tails wagging like puppies'. "Like water off a duck," the saying goes, and it is true. Drops flew off them like beads of mercury, leaving them dry and shiny and—judging by their excited quacking—thoroughly refreshed.

In winter I had visited this site many times, but in the cold season the place is not such a panorama of activity and motion. Winter energy is not about circulation. It has its pulse, but it is a slow, muffled one. Swift motion is the pennant of summer, the energy it takes to grow up and grow strong.

Three years ago, I spent half a week alone at the edge of this river, outfitted with nothing but a sleeping bag, one bottle of water, and a small tarp. During my days alone, I sat on the river's edge and watched the activity of ducks, eagles, deer, beavers, and otters.

The play of the otters, the flapping of the ducks, the bellows action of young osprey wings testing out the air—those summer days and nights on the riverbank,

everything seemed to be in motion. During the day, I came to believe that summer—the literal and symbolic season of growing and maturing—is about action. But then at night, when my eyes were blinded by the velvet dark of the new moon, my ears alone told me another truth about the growing time.

From the moment of late sunset, until the eastern sky showed its first delicate band of saffron on the horizon, nights on the river were attended, even summarized, by the sound of water, the circulatory system of the earth. Not just the sound of flowing water, which was ceaseless and hypnotic, but also the intimate sounds of creatures in relationship with water. In the dark, when there is no moon, the river song magnifies itself. I remembered the soft *ploosh* of lake pelicans landing at night on the water to fish, the hollow popping noises of the fish rising for insects, the staccato splashing of a beaver's tail, and the sound of something big swimming across the water with powerful, cadenced strokes.

As the hours passed in the deep dark, I recognized an intimate, subtle pulse thrumming beneath all the animal and night sounds. Without the distraction of sight, I found under all the activity and motion something like the measured tempo of a long-forgotten dance. By morning, I had been given a gift that I would never forget, and it is this: Action without a rhythm or pulse beneath it is not growth. It is just action. A dance without a tempo is just feet roaming around a floor. When a heart begins pulsing erratically, life is at risk.

Sinking my paddle into the water now, I matched strokes with my friend, and our canoe pierced the water and settled into a swift forward glide. We both knew instinctively when we had hit our stride, and the canoe

knew it too. Around us, ducks hurried away with their orange feet whirling like tiny paddle wheels. Lake pelicans swam in small groups, their elegant heads moving forward and back, forward and back, in precise synchrony.

All around me and through me was movement underpinned by rhythm—the dual lesson of the growing season, neither action nor cadence complete without the other. I sank into the steady stride of paddling, my arm muscles and elbows giving me feedback about the pace, telling me how to adjust the measure of my stroke. Some dreams never take root, for all our earnest activity. Instinctively, I have felt a sense of never finding my stride, my flow, when certain projects fell apart before their maturity. And there have been times when my own inner growth has been stymied by an inner sense of chaos and lost rhythm.

My doctor checks my wrist for a series of pulses whenever I go to him for a checkup—a diagnostic tool of Chinese medicine. In a healing-touch class, I learned to feel for several different pulses at the top of the head. At a solstice gathering in the canyon, Alan, a song keeper and drum maker, told us to keep the huge drum beating all night to the heartbeat of the earth. When we asked him what that rhythm was, he told us, “Listen. You’ll feel it.”

Our bodies flow with rivers of plasma and salt water set to the meter of a beating heart. Nature, too, has her own circulation system of waters, and her heart is the rhythm of the seasons, constricting the waters in winter, releasing them with a gush in summer. Behind every living thing is a steady, comforting, driving pulse. Behind every dream is a rhythm. Listen. You’ll feel it.

End piece



Teaching Story

Ayya Khema

The Buddha compared faith to a blind giant who meets up with a very sharp-eyed cripple, called wisdom. The blind giant, called faith, says to the sharp-eyed cripple, "I am very strong, but I can't see; you are very weak, but you have sharp eyes. Come and ride on my shoulders. Together we will go far." The Buddha never supported blind faith, but a balance between heart and mind, between wisdom and faith. The two together will go far. The saying that blind faith can move mountains unfortunately omits the fact that, being blind, faith doesn't know which mountain needs moving. That's where wisdom is essential, which means that a thorough understanding of the teaching is crucial.

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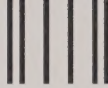
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Website: www.sacredjourney.org
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